

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Plaintiff,

vs.

JAMES MINCOFF,

Defendant.

CASE NO. 06cr1241 DMS

**ORDER DENYING  
DEFENDANT'S MOTION UNDER  
28 U.S.C. § 2255**

[Docket No. 302]

This case returns to the Court on Defendant's motion to vacate, set aside, or correct his sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255. The Government has filed a response to the motion, and Defendant has filed a traverse. After reviewing the motion, opposition, traverse, and all supporting documents and the record on file herein, the Court denies the motion.

**I.**

**BACKGROUND**

On June 6, 2006, Defendant James Mincoff, was indicted for conspiracy to distribute cocaine in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and 846. The indictment also named three other individuals: Juvenal Vega-Soto, Stephen Perry and Jessie Munoz. The indictment was part of a larger investigation of the Mexican Mafia which resulted in five other indictments against numerous other individuals.

Munoz was arrested on June 16, 2006. Mincoff turned himself in and was arrested on July 12, 2006. Between August 4, 2006, and June 29, 2007, the Government produced approximately 48,000

1 pages of documents and other relevant materials to defendants in each of the related cases. The  
 2 Government disclosed recordings and transcripts of conversations from wiretaps on phones used by  
 3 Munoz, including incriminating evidence against Mincoff from several phone calls in late July 2006,  
 4 and impeachment evidence against Munoz from several phone calls in mid-August 2006.

5 On June 25, 2007, Munoz pled guilty to one count of conspiracy to distribute cocaine in  
 6 violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and 846. The following day, the Government filed a superseding  
 7 indictment against Mincoff adding a count for attempted distribution of cocaine and a count for  
 8 unlawful use of a communication facility in violation of 21 U.S.C. § 843(b).

9 Mincoff's trial started on August 20, 2007. Munoz testified as the "main government witness"  
 10 at Mincoff's trial. *United States v. Mincoff*, 574 F.3d 1186, 1190 (9th Cir. 2009). On August 23,  
 11 2007, the jury found Mincoff guilty on all counts. The court subsequently sentenced Mincoff to 240  
 12 months in prison.

13 After the jury's verdict but before sentencing, the Government disclosed an additional batch  
 14 of discovery to defendants pending trial in the related cases. Within that discovery was a report  
 15 authored on February 21, 2006, by Federal Bureau of Investigation ("FBI") Special Agent Allan  
 16 Vitkosky detailing his meeting with an unidentified individual "in a position to testify." (Mot. to  
 17 Vacate, Ex. C.) The individual was most likely Munoz. (*Id.*) The report recorded incriminating  
 18 evidence the individual provided law enforcement against Thomas Durkin, a defendant in a related  
 19 case. According to the report, Durkin was charged in state court with possession of two ounces of  
 20 methamphetamine, and he conspired with Munoz to suborn perjury from Ricky Contreras to  
 21 undermine the state's case against Durkin. Four sentences of the report bore some relation to the  
 22 conspiracy to suborn perjury:

23 DURKIN also wrote, "RICKY did good . . . did the right thing. I know I'll blow them  
 24 out of the water in motions." According to the Individual this is a reference to RICKY  
 25 CONTRERAS, who testified falsely at the Preliminary Hearing (sic) that the  
 26 methamphetamine belonged to him and not DURKIN. (Intercepted conversations  
 indicated that DURKIN and JESSIE MUNOZ elicited the false / perjured testimony of  
 RICKY CONTRERAS on behalf of DURKIN).

27 (Mot. to Vacate, Ex. A.) This report and the timing of its production are at the center of the present  
 28 motion.

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2                     **II.**3                     **DISCUSSION**

4                     Mincoff raises three arguments in support of his Motion to Vacate Conviction and Sentence.  
 5                     First, he alleges the government suppressed Special Agent Vitkosky's FBI report in violation of  
 6                     *Brady v. Maryland*. Second, Mincoff claims the Government's suppression of the FBI report  
 7                     effectively denied him his Sixth Amendment right to confront witness Munoz. Third, Mincoff  
 8                     contends that if the Government did not improperly suppress the FBI report then his trial counsel was  
 9                     ineffective in failing to identify and exploit evidence of Munoz's involvement in a conspiracy to  
 10                  suborn perjury. The Government disputes all arguments.

11            A.        ***Brady v. Maryland***

12                  Mincoff argues that the Government improperly withheld impeachment evidence: the FBI  
 13                  report discussing witness Munoz's conspiracy to suborn perjury. Due process requires the  
 14                  Government to disclose to the defense any evidence favorable to the accused. *Brady v. Maryland*, 373  
 15                  U.S. 83, 87 (1963). Impeachment evidence that can be used to undermine the credibility of a  
 16                  government witness is considered favorable to the accused. *United States v. Bagley*, 473 U.S. 667  
 17                  (1985). Constitutional error occurs where the Government suppresses evidence favorable to the  
 18                  accused and that evidence was material to the outcome of the trial "such that the defendant was  
 19                  prejudiced by the suppression." *Bailey v. Rae*, 339 F.3d 1107, 1113 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2003). Evidence that  
 20                  witness Munoz undertook subornation of perjury was favorable to the extent it could have been used  
 21                  to impeach his credibility before the jury.

22                  Here, however, there was no *Brady* violation because the Government disclosed the favorable  
 23                  evidence. See *United States v. Goodwin*, 41 Fed. Appx. 115, 117 (9th Cir. 2002), (citing *United States*  
 24                  *v. Aichele*, 941 F.2d 761, 764 (9th Cir. 1991)) ("There is no suppression where the defendant has  
 25                  sufficient information to ascertain the *Brady* information on his own."). All of the relevant  
 26                  information in the FBI report was disclosed to Mincoff in the form of recordings and transcriptions  
 27                  of phone calls that clearly indicated Munoz participated in a conspiracy to suborn perjury and many  
 28

1 other crimes. Among the relevant recordings and transcripts was an intercepted call between Durkin  
2 and Munoz on August 16, 2005, in which the following exchange took place:

3 [Munoz]: Well was it on somebody's person? Was somebody  
4 carrying it?

5 [Durkin]: Huh?

6 [Munoz]: Was somebody carrying it or did . . . they find it in the  
7 car?

8 [Durkin]: Well I don't know. I don't know. Uh . . . they kind of  
9 . . . I don't know exactly what happened, you know. I  
10 . . . I probably won't know, I, uh . . .

11 [Munoz]: You know who you can talk to . . . you know, you know  
12 that name, what's his name, Rick?

13 [Durkin]: Huh?

14 [Munoz]: Ricky? Ricky?

15 [Durkin]: What about him?

16 [Munoz]: You should tell him to suck up and say it was his.

17 (Respondent's Opp'n. to Mot., App. at 20.) The FBI report's only additional mention of the  
18 conspiracy to suborn perjury reflects Contreras's actual commission of perjury and suggests no further  
19 action by Munoz and no additional grounds for his impeachment.

20 Mincoff cites *Benn v. Lambert*, 283 F.3d 1040 (9th Cir. 2002), and argues in effect “the state  
21 cannot satisfy its *Brady* obligation to disclose exculpatory and impeachment evidence by making some  
22 evidence available and asserting that the rest would be cumulative.” *Id.* at 1058. However, in *Benn*  
23 the Government actually suppressed evidence and that evidence concerned the witness’s history of  
24 lying as an informant and perjuring himself as a witness. The Ninth Circuit affirmed the district  
25 court’s holding that the suppressed evidence revealed the witness to be “completely unreliable, a liar  
26 for hire, ready to perjure himself for whatever advantage he could squeeze out of the system.” *Id.*  
27 (citing *Benn v. Wood*, No. C98-513FDB, 2000 U.S. Dist LEXIS 12741, at \*13-14 (W.D. Wash. June  
28 30, 2000)).

1        This case is distinguishable from *Benn* on two grounds. First, the Government did not suppress  
 2 material evidence. *Bagley*, 473 U.S. at 682. (“[E]vidence is material only if there is a reasonable  
 3 probability that, had the evidence been disclosed to the defense, the result of the proceeding would  
 4 have been different.”) The exclusion of the FBI report did nothing to affect Munoz’s credibility  
 5 because the same information was contained in discovery. Consequently, there is little possibility -  
 6 let alone a “reasonable probability” - that disclosing the FBI report would have had any effect on the  
 7 outcome of Mincoff’s trial.

8        Second, even if Mincoff had impeached Munoz regarding the conspiracy to suborn perjury,  
 9 it would not have substantially changed the jury’s assessment of his credibility. Both the Government  
 10 and Mincoff provided the jury with sufficient evidence to assess Munoz’s motives by discussing his  
 11 criminal history and the lenient sentence he hoped to receive in exchange for his testimony. The  
 12 Government’s closing argument included this admission:

13        Jessie Munoz has pled guilty in this case, and in several others. And  
 14 I told you he has admitted to doing a lot of bad things. You can, and  
 15 you should, view his testimony with great scrutiny. He is hoping to get  
 16 some reduction in sentence maybe, but he also told you he has agreed  
 17 to an offense level that is as high as the federal sentencing guidelines  
 18 allow.  
 19

20 (Respondent’s Opp’n. to Mot., at 19.) Thus, the jury had an accurate picture of factors motivating  
 21 Munoz to testify. As discussed, the Government disclosed all favorable information contained in the  
 22 report in question.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, there was no *Brady* violation.<sup>2</sup>

23 **B. Ineffective Assistance of Counsel**

24        Mincoff next argues that his trial counsel was ineffective in that he failed to impeach Munoz  
 25 regarding the above referenced conspiracy. An attorney’s representation violates the Sixth  
 26 Amendment right to counsel if two elements are met. *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984).  
 27 First, the attorney’s representation must fall below an objective standard of reasonableness. *Id.* at 688.

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28        <sup>1</sup>Absent suppression, the court declines to analyze prejudice.

<sup>2</sup>Because the Government did not suppress evidence, there is no basis for Mincoff’s claim that  
 the suppression of *Brady* evidence effectively denied him the Sixth Amendment right to confrontation.

1 Here the court “must indulge a strong presumption that counsel’s conduct falls within the wide range  
2 of reasonable professional assistance.” *Id* at 689. Second, there must be prejudice, *i.e.*, a reasonable  
3 ///

4 probability that but for counsel’s errors, the result of the proceedings would have been different. *Id.*  
5 at 694.

6 Here, it is not reasonably probable that impeaching Munoz regarding a conspiracy to suborn  
7 perjury would have changed the result of the proceedings. While such an accusation might reasonably  
8 cause jurors to question Munoz’s credibility and the veracity of his testimony, here, Munoz’s  
9 credibility was already under attack. Both the Government and Mincoff questioned Munoz about his  
10 criminal history and potentially lighter sentence due to his cooperation. Further, an accusation of  
11 subornation of perjury would not have materially undermined Munoz’s credibility because his  
12 testimony regarding Mincoff was corroborated by clearly inculpatory intercepted telephone calls.  
13 Therefore, Mincoff was not prejudiced by his attorney’s failure to question Munoz regarding the  
14 conspiracy to suborn perjury. Absent any prejudice, Mincoff did not receive ineffective assistance  
15 of counsel.

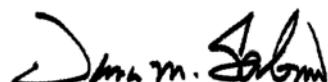
16 **III.**

17 **CONCLUSION**

18 For these reasons, Defendant’s motion pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255 is denied.

19 **IT IS SO ORDERED.**

20 DATED: July 26, 2011

21   
HON. DANA M. SABRAW

22 United States District Judge

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